The Cambodian League for Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO) and the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) condemn the sudden violent eviction of 117 families in Commune 4, Mittapheap District, Sihanoukville.

On the morning of April 20, 2007, some 150 military police and police officers armed with guns, electric batons and tear gas, raided the disputed land, burning down 80 houses and demolishing the remaining 26 houses. The evicted families were not permitted to remove possessions from their houses before they were destroyed.

No warning or official notice of the eviction was given, and a violent confrontation between police and villagers occurred. Two police and one military police were injured, as well as a number of villagers including a 77-year-old man who received an electric shock to his forehead; he remains in hospital. Thirteen villagers were arrested.

LICADHO and ADHOC question the legality of the eviction, which was apparently based on an order by Sihanoukville Municipality despite the fact that the ownership of the land is disputed and at least some of the families have a good claim to the land under Cambodia’s Land Law. In addition, the police action was based on a search warrant – but not an eviction notice – issued by the Sihanoukville Municipal Court.

According to a joint investigation by LICADHO and ADHOC, the cadastral office claims the land is owned by Peng Ravy, who is reportedly the wife of an adviser to a high-ranking official. She reportedly bought it from three previous owners who had purchased the land before 1993. Local authorities were consistently unable to provide any details of original ownership by these three individuals, saying that the documents had been lost.

Among the families evicted from the land are at least 17 families who have lived there for more than 10 years, giving them a claim to ownership under the Land Law. Prior to the eviction, local authorities offered these families money or alternative land to leave – a clear recognition that these families have valid claims to the land – but the negotiations failed.

The authorities refused to conduct a survey of all the families in the community, in order to determine which other ones may also have valid claims to ownership, or to negotiate with any others.

LICADHO and ADHOC condemn the authorities’ lack of transparency over ownership of the land and their willingness to conduct a violent eviction, rather than using peaceful negotiation to try to resolve the dispute.
“It is time for the Cambodian authorities to make a radical shift in their approach to land disputes,” said LICADHO director Naly Pilorge. “A failure to open honest dialogue with the people, and to find fair solutions for them, will only worsen the situation and lead to broader civil unrest.”

“Something must be done to bridge the growing gap between the people and the state”, added ADHOC investigator Chan Soveth. “The current land crisis in Cambodia is very dangerous for stability in the country.”

LICADHO and ADHOC do not endorse the use of violence by any members of community, and deplore the injuries suffered by both sides during the eviction. However, it should be noted that the confrontation was fueled by presence of heavily-armed police and military police storming the village without warning, and that there is a history of violence by authorities in this land case. On November 25, 2006, military policemen in civilian clothes forcibly dismantled the house of a villager and shot him in the leg.

LICADHO and ADHOC calls for the immediate release of the 13 individuals who were arrested during the eviction. In addition, we remind the government of its duty to protect the welfare of its citizens, especially the poorest and most vulnerable ones. As such, a social land concession should be given to the poor families who are now homeless because of the eviction, after a proper survey is conducted of the whole community.

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